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LETTER DATED 24 OCTOBER 1996 FROM THE SECRETARY-GENERAL ADDRESSED TO THE PRESIDENT OF THE SECURITY COUNCIL

I have the honour to refer to my letter of 14 October 1996 on the developments in eastern Zaire. I regret to inform the Council that since then the situation has further deteriorated.

During the past week, military activity within and it seems across borders has escalated. The result is that the humanitarian situation has further worsened.

An estimated 300,000 people are on the move in the Uvira and Bukavu regions of Zaire, bordering Rwanda and Burundi, in face of intensified fighting between Zairean troops and armed Banyamulenge. Those on the move include the 220,000 refugees - 143,000 from Burundi and 75,000 from Rwanda - who over the weekend of 19-20 October fled 12 camps scattered along a 75 km stretch of road between Uvira and Bukavu. About 60,000 of them are reported to have gone to Bukavu, along with 10,000 Zaireans displaced as a result of the same conflict. Fighting has prevented refugees in eight camps in the Uvira region from proceeding to Bukavu. They are mainly Burundi refugees who are believed to be in the surrounding hills. In the Bukavu area, Rwandan refugees fearing an imminent attack by the Banyamulenge have abandoned at least three camps. UNHCR is directing the new arrivals from Uvira to camps south-west of Bukavu, further from the border. At the same time, tens of thousands of people were seen walking towards these camps from the eastern side of Bukavu today.

On 17 October 1996, I dispatched my Special Envoy, Mr. Ibrahima Fall, to Kinshasa to assess the situation and consider what action the United Nations could take to defuse tension in eastern Zaire. On 22 October, the High Commissioner for Refugees, Mrs. Sadako Ogata, appealed to all sides to halt the violence immediately and avoid another humanitarian disaster in a region that had already suffered enough. The High Commissioner also expressed concern for the safety of humanitarian staff who had been unable to carry out their work because of the fighting. Following an intervention from both the UNHCR and my Special Envoy, arrangements were made for evacuation later that day of the remaining 58 international staff of UNHCR, other United Nations agencies and NGOs.

The same day, the Rwandan Government urged the refugees to come back to Rwanda and reaffirmed its assurances that they could return in safety and dignity. Concerned about the dramatic humanitarian situation in eastern Zaire and encouraged by this statement by the Rwandan authorities, the High Commissioner is transmitting a message through the local media, reassuring the refugees that, while UNHCR would try to do everything possible to assist them where they are, the Office would be ready to help them back in Rwanda and had for that purpose increased its reception and assistance capacities inside Rwanda.

Over the last several days, I have been in contact with the parties and interested Governments urging restraint and a cessation of hostilities that would allow time and space for the necessary political dialogue.

The failure to address the root causes of the conflicts in the region of the Great Lakes, in political and economic as well as security terms, has once again unleashed a spiral of violence and human suffering that may spin out of control unless urgent measures are taken immediately to contain the situation.

I should be grateful if you would bring the contents of this letter to the attention of the members of the Security Council.

(Signed) Boutros BOUTROS-GHALI